


# Los Angeles Times

## A Ray of Hope for Aficionados of New York Pizza

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CITYSCAPES / JOSEPH HANANIA  
So, what's in a name?

Plenty, thinks Didier Tenenbaum, 42, owner of Rey's New York Style Pizza on the Venice boardwalk.

Tenenbaum changed his shop's name from Del-Cort Pizza because business was slow, and the name Ray's is to New York pizza like Coke is to cola.

Now, not every New York pizza shop is called Ray's. Some are called Famous Ray's. Or World Famous Ray's. Or Original Ray's. Or Famous Original Ray's. Or Ray Bari's. Or Real Ray's. Or Only Famous Ray's. Almost all of them take their cue from Ray's Pizza, which opened 37 years ago at 27 Prince St. in Little Italy.

The owner of the original Ray's, Ralph Cuomo, changed his name to Rayfie and then shortened it to Ray, producing a first-class pizza—but failing to trademark his shop's name until it was too late.

And so, just the way L.A. finds itself full of Big Tommy's and Tommie's in tribute to the original

Tommy's burger joint, new incarnations of Ray's spread through New York and beyond.

Somewhat, though, this is one quintessential New York phenomenon that never reached the Southland. A check with directory assistance revealed not a single Ray's Pizza in the 213, 310 or 818 area codes, despite the fact that a slew of New York pizza chains, including LaMonica's New York Pizza and Johnnie's New York Pizza, have become a major presence here, popularizing the New York notion of pizza by the slice.

And then, in January, the other shoe dropped with the opening of Rey's—a name Tenenbaum thought close enough to attract expatriate New Yorkers, but different enough to keep him from getting sued by any of the now-litigious New York Rays.

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Don't look for any New York in Tenenbaum's accent. He is a former Parisian who once owned a chain of 17 pizzerias in Vancouver. (Pizza, he said, is easier to cook than French food).

It's his wife, who is from New York, who got him to sell his chain, move to Los Angeles and think New York.

So Tenenbaum bought Del-Cort Pizza and had his wife's aunt, who still lives in Brooklyn, send him a menu from Ray's on Prince Street. He modified his recipes to give his pies what he swears is an authentic Ray's flavor, then replaced the Del-Cort signage with that of Ray's.

And, just in case any ex-New Yorker might question the "e," Tenenbaum left one more enticement: a sign advertising Sabrett hot dogs, a brand generally unavailable in Los Angeles but instantly recognizable by anyone from the right coast.

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You will have to take Tenenbaum's word when he says the strategy worked. On a busy day, he says, the L.A. Rey sells about 600 slices, up about 10% since the name change. Many of those extra slices, he insists, are gobbled up by expatriate New Yorkers.

How does he know?

"New Yorkers always brag they're from New York" when discussing pizza, he says.

And there are other clues.

"A New Yorker will fold his pizza [slice] in half before eating it, while a Californian will hold it flat," he said with considerable authority for a man who has visited but never lived there.

"That's because New Yorkers quickly learn how to eat on the run."

Also, a New Yorker will "throw back an inferior pizza at you and demand his money back," he said, while his more genteel California counterpart will simply ask for another slice. (And yes, New Yorkers have "thrown back" slices even here, he says.)

Some competitors are not impressed.

Brooklyn native John LaMonica, 43, owner of LaMonica's New York Pizza, a local three-store chain, says: "New Yorkers are going to laugh at the name. Only someone who never went to New York and never tasted a Ray's pizza could be fooled."

It's easier to fool someone about New York pizza in New York, said Andre Neyrey, 33, president of Johnnie's New York Pizza, a six-restaurant chain.

"They think they're going to the original Ray's, and end up at one of the others," he said. But 3,000 miles is a long way to stretch the cheese, so to speak. "Out here, they're going to know this is not the original Ray's."

An informal Times survey of about two dozen of Tenenbaum's customers on a late afternoon discovered that, even here, the name is often the draw—but primarily with New York visitors. Not a single Rey's customer surveyed called himself or herself a genuine New Yorker.

Brett Moskowitz, 25, who frequently visits New York from suburban Connecticut, bought a slice here for the first time "because I recognize the Ray's name from when I was a kid. And it's a problem finding good pizza in California," he said.

Likewise, Monique Jacobs, 30, a former suburban New Jersey resident who now lives in Culver City, stopped "because it says Rey's New York Pizza. I don't order California pizza unless I'm taking care of my 3-year-old and am really desperate," she said.

But even if the name brings them in, it doesn't necessarily bring them back.

"This has got nothing in common with New York pizza," said 34-year-old Montreal visitor Brian Sackman, "except maybe for the shape.

"And I know. I've had Ray's pizza," he added.

"They use more cheese."